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ABSTRACT

This article presents a framework for considering the problems involved in developing and implementing more education programs in public secondary schools in the United States. Barriers that exist to moral education in the schools include political, philosophical, and pedagogical problems. The major political problems are those of public consensus and the incendiary nature of debate over values in schooling. Three philosophical reasons for the malaise in moral education are: (1) lack of consensus on a definition of moral education; (2) inability to verify moral claims; and (3) the issues of moral autonomy. As long as moral education's meaning remains elusive, schools will have difficulty establishing it as part of the curriculum. All the conventional disciplines speak authoritatively to their topics, while moral education cannot point to an uncontested basis for validation. Many philosophers argue that moral judgments and actions are not fully developed unless they are freely chosen. Pedagogical barriers to moral education include: (1) problems in defining how moral education fits into the curriculum; (2) lack of relevant preparation in pre-service teacher education; and (3) lack of clear criteria or assessment devices for measuring the success of moral education. (SM)

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MORAL EDUCATION: WHY NOT IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

by

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Moral Education: Why not in

Alan L. Lockwood has been a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, since 1970. He has published numerous articles on values education in educational journals which include the Harvard Educational Review, *the* Journal of Moral Education, Review of Educational Research, *and* Teachers College Record.

Contemporary calls for moral education come from many sources. Holders of public office such as Secretary of Education Bennett and California Superintendent Honig have urged an education infused with morality. Professional organizations such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and teachers' organizations like the American Federation of Teachers have advocated moral education. Academics as diverse as the late Lawrence Kohlberg and Professor Ed Wynne have presented a variety of programs and arguments for moral education. Parents, as Gallup polls attest, also want public schools to make moral education a key part of schooling.

In spite of what appears to be a broad consensus that moral education become a significant part of the school program, the best evidence suggests that it has not. Descriptions of schooling contained in recent studies show that instruction in the traditional subject areas continues to be the major mission of public secondary education. With few exceptions, public secondary schools do not have systematic programs designed to promote moral education. Why is this?

In what follows I offer some speculations as to why moral education has failed to take hold in public secondary schools. As will be seen, some barriers to moral education are political, some philosophical, and some pedagogical. I have no special wisdom on which of these barriers are the most stultifying nor how their interaction may, chock-a-block, stifle systematic efforts at moral education. Nonetheless, barriers do exist and advocacy alone will not bring them down.

Political Barriers

Public school officials thrive on consensus. Board members, administrators, and teachers most comfortably pursue their work when they believe, correctly or incorrectly, that there is broad public support for their efforts. Understandably, but perhaps unfortunately, public controversy is avoided whenever possible.

". . . barriers do exist, and advocacy alone will not bring them down."

Elections to office, bond issues, tax levies, salary negotiations, and longed-for scholastic tranquility can be threatened by the vocal disaffection of even a small minority of the citizenry.

In the normal course of events, most school officials expect periodic controversy. It comes with the territory. It is unusual, however, to find officials proposing programs that are likely to incite divisive public debate. While virtually any proposed program has the potential to threaten consensus, proposing a program in moral education can appear to guarantee it.

There is ample evidence of the incendiary nature of debate over values, moral and other, in schooling. Disputes in Kanawha County, Virginia; Warsaw, Indiana; Hillsboro, Missouri; Spencer, New York; Hawkins County, Tennessee; and elsewhere testify to the political turmoil moral issues can engender.

One reason school officials may see moral education as politically risky is fear of offending religious or other factions within the community. American society is perceived as highly pluralistic. This pluralism is ethical as well as ethnic. There is little public agreement on what is morally right and wrong. Moral education implies the teaching of morality. Morality is about what is right and wrong. If there is public disagreement about what is right and wrong then surely there will be public disagreement over proposals for moral education.

I do not intend to give the impression that, when it comes to morality, Americans cannot agree on anything. There is consensual endorsement of highly generalized values such as freedom, equality, honesty, and the like. Cracks in the consensus emerge, however, when we face specific moral problems in which these values either conflict or require interpretation. Many school officials fear these cracks can become fractures if a systematic program of moral education is advocated.

There is at least one other reason why moral education can be politically disharmonious. To put it starkly, I believe everyone considers him or herself to be a moral expert. Being moral is within the grasp of everyone; no advanced degrees are required. To the extent this is true, it is difficult to persuade taxpayers to

Public Secondary Schools?

support programs in moral education. The argument goes like this: I, speaking now as one of the aforementioned taxpayers, know little about chemistry, trigonometry, history, and so on. There are experts in those subjects and I am willing to have my tax dollars spent hiring certified experts to teach them. There are no certified experts in right and wrong. Consequently, it is folly to try to establish programs in moral education.

Philosophical Barriers

Because of the absence of political consensus, moral education has failed to penetrate the secondary school curriculum. In addition, there are conceptual or philosophical reasons for the malaise of moral education. I will address three of these philosophical problems.

A major problem for moral education is that no one is quite certain what it is. I once asked a graduate class of experienced educators to write down what they thought of when they heard the phrase "moral education." I received 18 different responses ranging from "instilling community standards" to "building a new society." The results of my informal classroom survey mirror the definitional ambiguity which plagues moral education. There are a number of competing conceptions of moral education which differ markedly in theory, goals, content, and methods. This is not the place to detail these differing conceptions of moral education. The point is that as long as moral education's meaning remains elusive or Balkanized, individual schools will have difficulty establishing it as part of the curriculum. These local problems increase geometrically if one considers the possibility of nationwide adoption of moral education.

A second philosophical barrier to the adoption of moral education has to do with the verification of moral claims. A perennial philosophical debate surrounds the question of how to prove or demonstrate that an assertion of what is morally right is correct or true. In contrast to science, for example, morality has no generally agreed-upon methodology for determining the truthfulness of beliefs. We may agree that stealing is wrong, but can we prove it with the same degree of persuasiveness that a scientist might demonstrate the law of gravity? It is not uncommon for people to believe that moral judgments are essentially matters of opinion, grounded on nothing more than our inclinations. On this view, if our opinions differ there is no firm basis for resolving our disagreement. We simply must agree to disagree.

The philosophical problem of validating moral claims may, at first glance, seem hopelessly abstract and irrelevant to the difficulty of incorporating moral education into the curriculum. I believe, however, that the issue implicitly contributes to the problems moral education faces. Conventional school subjects have legitimacy partly because we believe they derive from established canons of truthfulness or expertise. There is a way of solving quadratic equations. Algebra teachers are not just giving their opinion about how mathematics should operate. The law of gravity is not legislated by the whim of our physics teachers. We believe that all the conventional disciplines speak authoritatively to their topics. Moral education, on the other hand, cannot point to an uncontested basis for validation. What is taught in schools must appear to be true or at least authoritative. Moral education has difficulty claiming such support.

A third philosophical problem which deters the adoption of programs in moral education arises from the issue of autonomy. Many philosophers argue that moral judgments and actions are not fully developed unless they are, in some sense, freely chosen. To be truly moral one must act from principles to which one is personally committed. Behavior or judgment which is the consequence of external coercion is not part of the moral domain.

The concept of moral autonomy is an impediment to moral education, because many adults are uneasy with the notion of adolescents deciding for themselves what is morally right and wrong. There is a widely-held belief that schooling should influence and shape the minds of young people, not simply set them free. To the extent this is true and to the extent that morality implies, in part, freedom of choice, moral education can be seen as threatening. This threat can be more ominous at the high school level as adolescents increasingly conduct their lives free from adult supervision and scrutiny.

These philosophical problems make it difficult to clarify the essential tasks of moral education. School officials or members of the public may not use the language within which I have framed them, but whether articulated or not, these complexities hinder the endorsement of programs in moral education.

Pedagogical Barriers

I have categorized this final set of barriers as pedagogical. Here I consider the problems moral education presents for the teachers and department heads who have the primary responsibility for specifying and executing the curricular mandates of their school districts. Regardless of which conception is endorsed, moral education presents special problems to the teaching staff.

Any effort to establish programs in moral education will encounter curricular resistance stiffer than that other new programs face. There are essentially two ways the curriculum responds to pressures for new content. Either new courses are created or existing ones modified. For example, when the need for sex education is acknowledged by school officials, new courses are frequently created. When social studies departments are persuaded that the roles of women and minorities have been given short shrift in the history curriculum, existing courses are often modified to place greater emphasis on the contributions of those groups.

However, curricular changes for moral education are much more difficult to implement. For one thing, I know of no advocate of moral education who believes its aims can be

Moral Education . . .

accomplished by the creation of a new course requirement. Secondly, calls that moral education infuse the entire school program contain more exhoratory rhetoric than plausible curriculum policy.

One reason for the difficulty of establishing moral education as part of the curriculum, whether as a single course or as an element of all courses, is the earlier-mentioned lack of consensus on its meaning. The problem is especially trying for at least two reasons. For one thing, most teachers feel pressure to cover existing content which, many believe, already strains the time bounds alloted for their specialties. There is resistance to reallocating time for new curricular responsibilities. Also, it is unclear how the various subject areas should be responsible for moral education. To say something as elusive as moral education is the responsibility of all members of the school staff can mean, in practice, that it becomes the responsibility of no one.

Another pedagogical barrier arises in pre-service teacher education programs. It is most unusual for prospective teachers to have taken courses in ethical philosophy or courses which treat the goals and practices of various curricula in moral education. By and large, secondary teachers are educated to be specialists in the conventional academic disciplines. Like it or not, our teachers are not trained to be moral educators. Teachers shoulder the primary task of enacting their school's curriculum. Only a Pollyanna would expect teachers to be comfortable or confident with the slippery mission of moral education.

A final obstacle confronting efforts at moral education is the matter of measuring curricular success. Increasingly, school officials are being asked or required to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs. This pervasive press for accountability usually focuses on achievement test scores in the traditional subject areas.

But how can we measure the success of moral education? Mired in a bog of definitional ambiguity, competing goals, and public controversy, moral educators cannot offer widely-accepted criteria of success let alone assessment devices which can determine the effectiveness of systematic programs in moral education. To the extent that schools are required to demonstrate curricular potency, efforts at moral education will no doubt remain thwarted.

"Only a Pollyanna would expect teachers to be comfortable or confident with the slippery mission of moral education."

Conclusion

I do not pretend to have exhaustively cataloged all barriers to moral education. Certainly there are others. Those that I have identified range from the rather obvious, for example, school officials' concern with maintaining public consensus, to the more subtle, for example, the issue of moral autonomy. It is unclear which of the barriers have the most daunting effect on efforts to promote moral education. Taken together, however, they present a formidable obstacle for moral educators who wish to influence the public secondary school curriculum.

I should reiterate that these barriers to moral education most directly confront the public secondary school. Private schools, particularly those with religious affiliations, can scale many of the barriers cited. Also, barriers to some forms of moral education are probably lower for elementary schools. This is partly because there is some general agreement that children be socialized into such basic moral values as honesty, respect for property, and avoiding violence in solving disputes. Barriers to moral education become most salient at the secondary school level where adolescents are more likely to question authority and where teachers view their primary responsibilities as teaching their academic specialties.

In outlining the barriers cited, I have treated moral education as if it were a unified concept. Some approaches to moral education may be less deterred by some of the barriers than others. I would argue, however, that all versions of moral education encounter these obstacles; some barriers will be easier to hurdle than others.

A Sampler of Approaches to Moral Education

Moral Inculcation

This approach intends to shape students' beliefs and behavior in accord with the dictates of some moral authority, religious or other. The specific beliefs and behaviors to be shaped will vary depending upon which "moral authority" guides the curriculum. A program derived from a set of religious beliefs would likely differ from a program derived from a political ideology such as Marxism, but in either case, the goal is to produce a uniform point of view. Currently, the moral inculcation approach is often called character education.

References

Goble, F. G. & Brooks, B. D. (1983). *The Case for Character Education*. Ottawa, Illinois: Green Hill Publishers.

Goble and Brooks present an argument which claims, among other things, that character education reduces school vandalism and other destructive behaviors of young people.

Character Education Curriculum. American Institute for Character Education, San Antonio, Texas.

These curriculum materials originally were published in 1974, but have been periodically revised.

Moral Clarification

Unlike inculcation, this approach does not intend to teach a set of "right" answers to moral questions. Instead, the general aim of clarification is to help young people better understand themselves and the moral beliefs and commitments they personally endorse. Advocates of this approach frequently contend that as adolescents better understand themselves, their self-esteem will be enhanced and they will be more likely to be productive members of society. The following references offer one argument for the clarification

approach and one set of classroom activities:

References

Raths, L. E., Harmin, M., & Simon, S. B. (1978). *Values and Teaching* (2nd edition). Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.

Values and Teaching presents the rationale and practices of values clarification, perhaps the best-known approach to treating values in the curriculum.

Simon, S. B., Howe, L. W., & Kirschenbaum, H. (1972). *Values Clarification*. New York: Hart Publishing Company.

This volume contains 79 specific lessons consistent with the values clarification approach.

Moral Reasoning

This approach intends to improve the quality of young peoples' reasoning about moral issues. The aim is to help students make more coherent, better-defended moral judgments. Students are taught to recognize the moral issues at stake when confronting a moral dilemma, to weigh evidence, and to analyze and debate opposing viewpoints. Students exposed to this approach, proponents frequently argue, will be more likely to respect the legitimate rights and well-being of others and to take them seriously when making moral decisions.

References

Reimer, J., Paolitto, D. P., & Hersh, R. H. (1983). *Promoting Moral Growth* (2nd edition). New York: Longman.

Promoting Moral Growth presents the rationale for moral education derived from Kohlberg's work and describes how teachers may implement the approach.

Lockwood, A. L. & Harris, D. E. (1985). *Reasoning with Democratic Values*. New York: Teachers College Press.

These classroom materials contain 49 case studies and lessons integrating the moral reasoning approach into the secondary United States History curriculum.

Democratic Self-Governance

This approach to moral education seeks to alter the decision-making arrangements of the school so that adolescents have direct experience with the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy. Students share in the setting of school rules, determining punishments for their violations, and arguing for changes in policy. Advocates of this approach believe that schools should embody the precepts and practices of democracy, not simply teach about them.

References

Democratic education in schools and classrooms. (1983). National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin Number 70. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.

This bulletin is a collection of articles which describe and advocate democratic school practices.

Mosher, R. (Ed.) (1980). *Moral education: A first generation of research and development*. New York: Praeger.

This is a collection of articles, many of which deal with the application of Kohlberg's ideas of just community and moral education in American schools.

For amplification of these and other approaches see:

Chazan, B. (1985). *Contemporary Approaches to Moral Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Chazan examines the views of such moral educators as Emile Durkheim, John Wilson, Lawrence Kohlberg and others, including a chapter describing the views of those opposed to moral education.

Hersh, R. H., Miller, J. P., & Fielding, G. D. (1980). *Models of Moral Education*. New York: Longman.

In this volume, seven approaches to moral education are described and briefly evaluated.

To what extent does Lockwood's analysis help to explain the experience of educators who have tried to implement programs of moral education in high schools? In the pages that follow, we talked with three who represent different approaches and who worked in different settings. Each person was asked three main questions: What approach to moral education have you tried to promote; how has it been successful; what problems have you experienced? We do not presume to interpret for the reader the implications of these interviews, but differences between the institutional contexts of public high schools versus that of the private Christian school should obviously be taken into account.